

REGIONAL POLITICS: THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL PLANNING BODIES IN  
ENSURING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

by

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A REPORT

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## **Abstract**

Regions are an intricate network of communities, geographies and economies that together impact the long-term growth and stability of one other. Cooperation between municipalities within the same region is vital in order to achieve sustained growth, both economically and in the built environment. The research question states: What is the value of regional planning bodies in ensuring effective communication and collaboration among region-wide governmental and non-governmental agencies? This research report includes a detailed history of the role and significance of regional planning bodies in the United States, as well as a case study involving the regional planning body in Houston, Texas and the Gulf Coast Region. The Houston-Galveston Area Council is the lead participant in a 25-member coordinating committee working together to complete a regional sustainability plan under the federally funded Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program. The interviews included in this report give conclusions and recommendations to the success of the region working together in terms of communication and collaboration. The challenge of establishing effective collaboration among a variety of agencies in the Gulf Coast Region is proving to be difficult and slow moving, however, there are signs of improvement as the three-year grant program moves forward. The conclusions from the literature review and case study show that regions with an unbiased planning body benefit both from the communication and social capital gained by working together on a shared goal.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this report to my parents. Without them, I would not have succeeded with the confidence and knowledge that I have.

## **CHAPTER 1 - Introduction**

Regional government, for many years, has been widely used to generate and maintain interlocal cooperation. Dating back to 1920s, regional government structures have been studied and practiced as a way for communities across a region to communicate and work together. Cooperation between municipalities within the same region is vital in order to achieve sustained growth, both economically and in the built environment. This research paper will look at the history of regional planning bodies. Additionally, the paper will use the City of Houston and its regional planning body as a case study. The aforementioned agencies have joined forces to stimulate communication and cooperation across their 13-county region under the guise of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant program.

For the purposes of this paper, the research question is: What is the value of regional planning bodies in ensuring effective communication and collaboration among region-wide governmental and non-governmental agencies?

For the report, a background history of regionalism and its impact in planning and politics will be evaluated and discussed. Understanding the role of regionalism in planning is important for making the case that these governing bodies, although free from legislative power, have legitimacy in providing a mediator role in establishing trust and communication among multiple agencies. An active regional planning body with effective collaboration can develop successful plans and communities. Planners should understand the importance of a regional planning body serving as mediator when communities come together to discuss growth and economic sustainability in their region.



There are two major parts of the report; the first is a detailed account of the history of regionalism. The literature for this section is focused around regionalism, planning and politics, using previous studies and evaluations of established regional planning bodies to better understand the concepts and methodology. An examination of the structure of current regions with active regional planning bodies will be beneficial to finding the strengths and weaknesses in the research question. The second part is an analysis of a collaborative effort by the Houston, Texas region. Data and information will be collected as the 25-member consortium meets to develop the Sustainable Communities Regional Plan.

## **The Development of Regional Government**

The history of regionalism is cyclical, and can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century. The first regional planning organization was the Regional Plan Association, established in 1922, which focused on the long range plans and policies of the New York- New Jersey- Connecticut metropolitan region (Regional Plan Association, 2011). Metropolitan regions from around the country began adopting versions of the Regional Plan Association, and regionalism in the 1950s and 60s focused on the “streamlining” of government; reducing government for the sake of efficiency. (Savitch & Vogel, 1996) It was believed that with a consolidated form of government, metropolitans, regions and local communities could adapt fewer policies and respond to their needs more promptly. Many municipalities attempted to strengthen the authority of their metropolitan government, but over time this trend dissipated. A revival for local interdependence and economic survival started the push for regional government again in the 1990s. (Savitch & Vogel, 1996) This resurgence of interest in regional government was no longer motivated by efficiency. Instead, the 1990s supported regionalism “by a belief in local

interdependence and economic survival” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996). Values from both of these trends now make up the views on regional government today.

Regional government has been widely practiced across the United States, with varying degrees of involvement and legislative power. Regions have struggled with what level of power or involvement to give regional planning bodies and agencies, and surrounding municipalities have sometimes not supported a regional effort. These obstacles have been overcome in some cases, but typically regionalism is misunderstood.

Cities already have many challenges and issues facing them independently, so oftentimes the added involvement of a regional planning body may seem gratuitous. These cities have a difficult time finding the time to continually communicate and work with neighboring municipalities. These communities may share an industry, airport or similar geography, which are all important to discuss and support. However, due to politics and lack of resources, communities may never communicate. When it comes to producing a shared vision for transportation, preserving of natural resources, or affordable housing, who will be the unbiased mediator? Even though regionalism has been a planning concept that has come in and out of popularity over the last half century, it is still a vital concept that will be helpful to the future of our regions and sprawling cities.

## **Definition and Function of Regional Government**

Currently, the geographic description of a region is only clearly defined by the Census Bureau, which classifies areas into Metropolitan Areas, Metropolitan Statistical Areas, Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas, and Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas. Defined by Savitch & Vogel (1996), regional politics is “intergovernmental, nested in economic linkages

between cities and suburbs, and fueled by mobile capital, labor, and culture” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996). John Glasson in his book *An Introduction to Regional Planning* simply described a region as a “... flexible concept, referring to a continuous and localized area intermediate between national and urban levels” (Glasson, 1974, pg. 7).

This definition is pertinent to this report for many reasons. First, the Houston region is connected by economic industry and capital. The coastal communities influence and are impacted by the market and economy in Houston and surrounding communities. Second, the unique geographic landscape of southeast Texas, including the eco-regions of Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, connects the 13 counties included in the Houston-Galveston Area Council jurisdiction. With this, the road network and transportation system in place are inevitably linked and dependent upon the condition within the region. Third, the culture of the people living in the region is not exclusive to specific communities. Due to the shared market, road network, and capital, the residents share a culture unique to other parts of the country. These factors help define and create a region that is the Gulf Coast Region, making it vital that they work together towards a sustainable regional plan.

The concept of planning flexibility is also essential to keep in mind throughout this report. It is important to note that this paper questions the role of regional governance in communication and collaboration between jurisdictions and various agencies. Its purpose is not to defend the varying degrees of a regional planning body’s legislative power. The Houston-Galveston Area Council represents a voluntary regional organization, one that provides resources and data for the local governments involved.

## **CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review**

The literature review for this report is important in understanding the history and current structure of regional planning bodies in the United States. The information gathered will provide helpful resources for better evaluation of the case study in Chapter 4. For the literature review, four main sources were analyzed and researched to help better understand the history of regionalism in the United States and the impacts of collaboration and cooperation among various agencies that play a role in planning and politics.

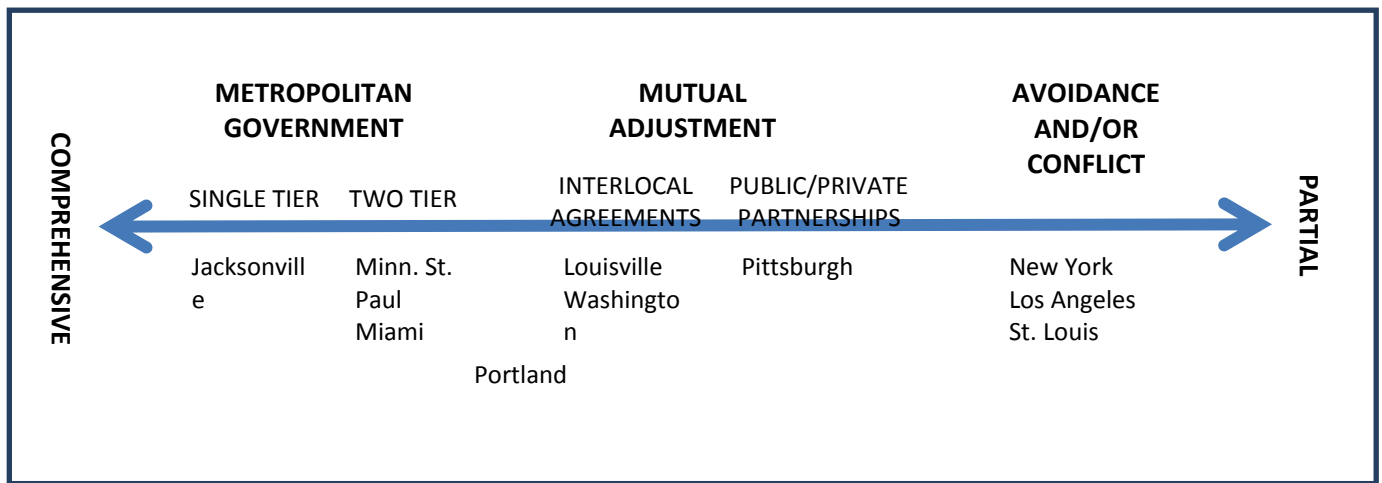
Regional Politics (1996), edited by H.V. Savitch and Ronald Vogel, is a study of the regional political structure in ten cities. The focus of this book centers on the “functional city”; a flexible definition for a region connected by “economic intercourse, social identities, and political institutions” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996, pg. 16). The ten cities used as case studies (Jacksonville, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Miami, Portland, Louisville, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, New York City, Los Angeles, and St. Louis) provide in depth information into the different types of regional planning bodies and the types of working relationships that the cities, counties and Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) have.

Regional Politics also discusses the terms “cooperation and coordination”, synonyms to the terms communication and collaboration that are referenced in the research question. The examples used for cooperation and coordination will help the author of this report establish concrete definitions for and in defending “effective communication and collaboration”.

Savitch & Vogel reference a possible resistance to interlocal cooperation, saying that “interdependence does not always mean cooperation... observe outcomes in which cooperation is kept within limits or even resisted” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996). This resistance to cooperation is a possible outcome of the interviews that will be given to the consortium members. Regions and

communities have independent views and reasons for resisting cooperation and collaboration across multiple jurisdictions.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the continuum that Savitch and Vogel use in illustrating the vast array of relationships and types of involvement a region may entertain. The ten metropolitan regions are those discussed further in the book.



**Figure 2-1 Continuum of Regional Institutions**

Regional Politics also gives a general history of regionalism, describing the two major waves throughout the past 100 years. After a report by Robert Wood in 1961 titled 1400 Governments, metropolitan areas around the country began establishing metropolitan governments with a focus on efficiency and streamlining. The cities most notably involved in this wave of regionalism were Miami, Nashville, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Jacksonville, and

Source: *Regional Politics*, edited by H.V. Savitch and Ronald Vogel. Figure recreated by author of this report.

Indianapolis ranging from 1957 to 1969.

The second resurgence happened in the 1990s, after researchers like Myron Orfield and David Rusk painted a picture of polarization and the need for regional government. These theorists believed in local interdependence and economic survival. The regional institutions studied in this book vary in jurisdictional influence and control, but are important to note when referencing and understanding the various types of regional planning bodies.

The structure of regional governance in Los Angeles is similar to the Houston region in some aspects. Comprised of five counties, with traditionally strong city and county governments, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), seeks to establish regional coordination. Like H-GAC, SCAG is “an advisory body with limited decision-making authority, particularly in transportation, air quality, and land use planning” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996, pg. 60). SCAG is supported by a regional council of elected officials from across the region, and is based on voluntary membership.

Due to this voluntary governance, “regional decisions do not naturally occur in greater Los Angeles. There is little incentive for either county or city governments to develop coordinated policies” (Savitch & Vogel, 1996, pg. 62). During the 1980s, the communities within SCAG have become more independent and closed off to collaborative efforts, stemmed by a decline in wealth and increased diversity. Nevertheless, regional plans over congestion management, air pollution and transportation have been adopted and incorporated across the five counties. Savitch and Vogel quote city planners Fulton and Newman on the regional approach greater Los Angeles has taken:

The truth is that regional planning in Southern California has become a floating crap game. It’s not controlled by SCAG or any other single agency. Rather it is centered - if that is the word - in scattered meetings and negotiations and

skirmishes that occur over this 100 square mile region. It's not quite what the advocates of metropolitan planning had in mind back in the sixties but in the long run this free-floating system may prove workable for such a fragmented region. (Fulton & Newman, 1992) (Savitch & Vogel, 1996, pg. 70).

The regional governance explained for Pittsburgh also correlates closely with the consortium case study for the Houston region. Pittsburgh has taken a public-private partnership approach to regional governance. The partnership works with both public and private institutions to carry out programs that work towards redevelopment and economic restructuring in the Pittsburgh region. This strategy is exclusive to business development, however, whereas the consortium is working towards a complex goal of a regional sustainability plan, incorporating business development, environmental concerns, and social equity.

Regionalism and Realism takes an extensive look at the study of governments in the New York Metropolitan Area. The Port of New York Authority and the Regional Plan Association (RPA) was established in 1921 and defined its region as "all of part of seventeen New York and New Jersey counties within a twenty-five-mile radius of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor" (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 6). The first regional plan was prepared and issued in 1929. Smaller regional agencies have been present in the tri-state region ever since, with the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission being established in 1971. Due to President Ronald Reagan's cuts on national support for regional planning, the commission ceased to exist after only ten years. Metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) were stable during the Reagan Administration but they were not found effective in the New York tri-state region. Currently, the tri-state region has six MPOs, which focus mainly on transportation issues. A recurring issue for the tri-state region deals with the vast amount of public authorities present in the system, with a

total of 2,179 governments. Understanding the history of this region is important in understanding the development of regional planning organizations and bodies since the 1920s.

More pertinent to this report, the authors of *Regionalism and Realism* define four values of regionalism: efficiency, competitiveness, equity and community. Efficiency and competitiveness pertain to the “efficiency in delivering services, and competitiveness in the world economy” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 38). Equity deals with the retention of residents and economic bases to prevent jobs moving out of the region. “Regionalists seek to relieve older inner cities of this disproportionate burden and advance social equity by sharing over entire regions the cost of serving the poor” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 38). The fourth value, community, deals especially with the terms used in this report:

...focus is deliberately on regional *governance*, not regional *government*.

The former is more inclusive and less defined. Perhaps reflecting the decade’s general disenchantment with government, this formulation preserves a large role for the private and not-for-profit sectors. It suggests collaboration and cooperation, consensus building rather than winning political battles, and the value of partial rather than comprehensive solutions (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 38).

This concept of regional governance is inclusive, one that includes both the private and not-for-profit sectors. Governance, as opposed to government, emphasizes the role of collaboration. Returning to Table 1.1, governance supports the “value of partial rather than comprehensive solutions” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 38). When defining the role of H-GAC in the case study, the differences between governance and government are important to consider. This report does not advocate the need for planned changes in the forms of



government, but rather the informal process that brings together agencies and communities to collaborate over shared interests such as school districts, transportation, air quality and long-term infrastructure.

Social equity, one of the four values of regionalism according to the authors, is also a critical component of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant. Considered an interdependent challenge of economic competitiveness and revitalization, the federal government has stressed the importance of finding implementation strategies and planning guidelines to help mitigate the detriments to a community that can happen as a result of polarization and social injustice. According to Benjamin and Nathan, “Regionalism...enhances fairness in the distribution of governmental resources among people of different races and across social classes” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 150). This idea of social equity resonates in a region such as the Houston-Galveston region that faces a multitude of geographies and population sizes, including a diverse population and economic structure.

Social equity is a sensitive topic, as it involves deeply held values from various ethnic groups and socio-economic backgrounds, and when placed in the region context can bring about tension. The authors of *Regionalism and Realism* “stress that regional reformers who pursue equity should seek it as a result, not as a cause or main motivator, of regional action” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 222).

*Regionalism and Realism* also gave a contrasting view to the efforts in the case study detailed later in this report. The authors drew a picture of types of collaboration that work and types that don't, looking specifically at the number of jurisdictions involved in order to establish interlocal action. “As more jurisdictions are involved in negotiations, the process becomes more complex, and interlocal action becomes less likely” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 185). This

idea is valid, as the authors focus on physical implementation strategies and solutions, not the creation of a broad regional sustainability plan, like the case study will develop. It is important to note, however, the challenges that large groups of jurisdictions face when attempting to collaborate and communicate.

Following studies done in and around the New York tri-state region, the authors found that:

...large-scale, multijurisdictional collaborations were less likely to be pure cases of bottom-up action than those involving fewer localities. They tended to occur in relatively rare situations: when one larger government was given clear legal authority to act by the state but required the cooperation of others to act effectively, quickly, or with minimal political cost; or when the consequences of noncooperation in a larger effort, even for the most resistant jurisdictions, were fiscally or politically unacceptable (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 186).

This idea will be critical to the case study, as it gives an opposing view to the success rate of what H-GAC and the coordinating committee are attempting to accomplish. It also gives an honest look at how these collaborative efforts are initiated. The communities and citizens within the Houston-Galveston region did not begin a bottom-up approach for advocating a regional sustainability plan. Instead, the federal government offered a grant with implementation money attached in order to incentivize regions to come together and establish long-term sustainable goals and guidelines.

Overall, the authors of *Regionalism and Realism* see the value in regional planning bodies saying, "...the use of an overarching government to induce collaboration in a layered

governmental system seems to offer a way of aiding cities when other approaches... have failed” (Benjamin & Nathan, 2001, pg. 192).

Myron Orfield restructured regionalism by renaming it metropolitics, in his book *Metropolitics: A Regional Agenda for Community and Stability* (1997). Concentrated poverty, competing markets and uncooperative cities led regions to polarization and increasing sprawl. The solution to these issues, according to Orfield, lies in the restructuring of metropolitan politics. This restructuring of centers focuses around the relationships among multiple players and stakeholder groups in a community- including church, environmental and business community groups, along with cities, suburbs and counties.

Using the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul as an example, Orfield establishes a regional agenda that is relevant to the research question for multiple reasons. All regions are susceptible to sprawl, polarization, decline and economic recessions. Understanding that the same problems are possible for any region, the success of the Twin City Region can be used to support the need for a regional planning body. The case study in the Houston, Texas region can be applied to Orfield’s definition of stability. What is regional stability? Can regions attain it without a regional planning body? Is regional stability even necessary? It was the hope of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant that a regional sustainability plan would inspire collaboration in the three components of sustainability: social equity, economic stability, and environmental conditions.

Orfield references columnist Neal Peirce, who valued “emphasizing the economic interdependence of metropolitan areas and the need for regional economic coordination to compete effectively in the new world economy, rather than social polarization between cities and suburbs or equity concerns” (Orfield, 1997, pg. 11). For this report, the focus will rely heavily on

the idea that regional collaboration is necessary in staying competitive and community-focused, two of the four core values of regionalism mentioned earlier in this study.

Understanding the focus of Orfield's work in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region helps to understand the resurgence of a regional agenda in the 1990s. Orfield focuses on a metropolitan government that shares a tax base, helping to support education, transportation, and avoid polarization caused by suburban flight and high land costs. Understandably, this approach to regional government is not feasible across the county, as political views and current fiscal structures cannot and will not support a regional shift towards metropolitics.

*Place Matters* by Peter Drier, John Mollenkopf and Todd Swanstrom (2001) gives an argument for the urban poor, and how regions can establish policies to promote equity. This book is helpful in understanding the importance of community groups and governmental collaboration. The information surrounding the decentralization of urban centers and the impacts on the poor is important to understand when discussing and analyzing regionalism. Politics is inevitably embedded in regionalism, and the solution to problems that arise is through reform and policymaking. Therefore, seeing the impact of sprawl on urban centers and inevitably the region can assist in supporting the argument that governmental collaboration is essential in solving local and regional problems.

## **CHAPTER 3 - Methodology**

What is the value of a regional planning body in ensuring effective communication and collaboration across region-wide governmental and non-governmental agencies? The research question allows for a broad range of interpretations on how to achieve this “effective communication and collaboration”.

The purpose of this research is to identify the value of a regional planning body in ensuring effective communication and collaboration across region-wide governmental and non-governmental agencies. The findings from the research completed will be illustrated through a case study derived from personal interviews with professionals involved in the case study coordinating committee.

### **Defining the Terms**

Defining the terms used in the research question is important to understanding why there is value associated with them and what that value could mean for a successful, working partnership. The concepts of effective communication and collaboration can be ambiguous, especially when dealing in the political framework. In an article titled “Developing a Collaborative Model for Environmental Planning and Management” by S. Selin and D. Chavez, collaboration is when “decisions are made by a consensus of affected parties” (Selin & Chavez, 1995). This “consensus” is critical to the report. In a region-wide group working towards a shared goal, are all parties equally represented and heard? What are the consequences if they are not? Paired with collaboration, the idea of effective communication is also introduced. Using the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a reference, the definition for effective communication for this report will be defined as a process by which information in exchanges between individuals produces a decided, decisive or desired effect.

In *Managing Growth in America's Communities* by D. Porter, collaborative regional planning is a technique used to support local growth management. This technique “promotes agreements among local governments about long-range plans for regional development” and can “build social capital and spur economic development” (Porter, 2008).

For this report, the definition of a regional planning body will be taken from State of Texas Local Government Code. In Chapter 391, the definition of a Regional Planning Body is “a regional planning commission, council of governments, or similar regional planning agency consisting of a county or two or more adjoining counties that have common problems of transportation, water supply, drainage, or land use; similar, common, or interrelated forms of urban development or concentration; or special problems of agriculture, forestry, conservation, or other matters” (State of Texas, 1987). The general purpose of these commissions is “to make studies and plans to guide the unified, far-reaching development of a region, eliminate duplication, and promote economy and efficiency in the coordinated development of a region” (State of Texas, 1987).

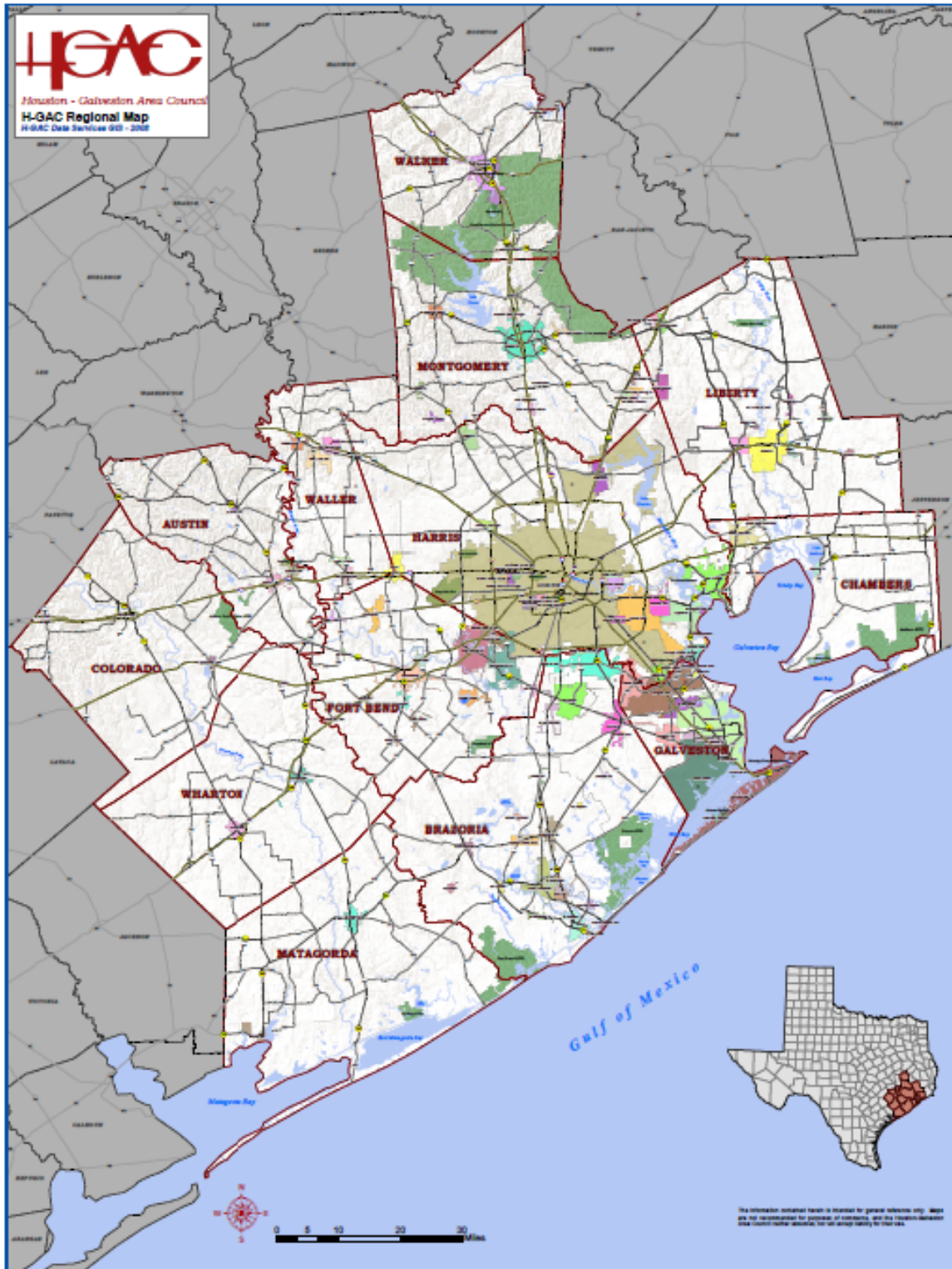
The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) is considered a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), a requirement of communities over 50,000 residents for carrying out the federally regulated transportation planning process. H-GAC is the largest MPO in Texas, with 8,466 square miles and a 2000 Census population of 4,669,571. The population is second to the North Central Texas COG which had a population of 4,879,535 in 2000 (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2011).

## **Case Study**

An analysis of a collaborative effort by the Houston, Texas region along with the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) will be reviewed and observed. This analysis will

help provide first hand information regarding the details and efficiency of political groups, non-profit agencies, and the public and private sector working together towards a shared regional goal. The region is comprised of thirteen counties: Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller, and Wharton. The study area is illustrated in Figure 3.1. This agency is currently the lead applicant in a 25-member coordinating committee working towards the completion of HUD's Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant. The grant is an interagency planning effort for achieving improved social equity, economic stability, and environmental conditions across a region.

Figure 3-1 The Houston-Galveston Area Council Region



Source: [http://www.h-gac.com/community/images/region\\_map.pdf](http://www.h-gac.com/community/images/region_map.pdf)



The study area for this report was chosen due to the researcher's experience during an internship over the summer. Participation in the consortium and grant application process allowed the researcher to observe governmental and non-governmental communication and collaboration. Those two techniques proved to be important for achieving positive and productive change to a community. Planners need to understand the positive and negative impacts a region can achieve with the presence of a regional planning body.

In June 2010, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced a notice of funding availability to encourage regions to develop a Regional Plan for Sustainability. The monies awarded that will go towards the development and implementation of a comprehensive, collaborative region-wide plan. This unique interagency partnership is an example of the federal government mandating regionalism and efficient collaboration, which is relevant to this report.

The Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant is an example of a political top-down approach to ensuring change on the local level. An interagency effort, modeled by the federal agencies themselves, serves as an illustration for what cities and regions should start mirroring. The case study will be looking at the collaborative efforts of the region-wide consortium that applied for the grant, and the effectiveness of these relationships. Although largely funded and led by the City of Houston, it is the H-GAC that will oversee the grant application and lead coordinating member duties. The sampling of the collaborative efforts will be done by obtaining consortium meeting minutes, the grant application, and a variety of interviews with members of both governmental and non-governmental agencies involved in the consortium. The efforts made by H-GAC and the consortium members will be recorded and analyzed dating back to their initial conception in July 2010.

The analysis will provide answers to the research question in many ways. First, in the efforts to stimulate cooperation and communication among local and region-wide communities, is a regional agency necessary and useful? Second, politics are embedded in the practice of planning. On the local, regional, and federal level, politics play a part in decision-making. Planners will be able to approach region wide collaboration more rationally, inevitably producing more outcome and implementation for their community. Last, the case study of Houston and H-GAC will illustrate the broad capacity for regional planning. An agency such as H-GAC can help facilitate a positive, cooperative collaboration region-wide, without much political power or leverage. This will show that regional planning bodies can be an asset to every region across the country, each with varying levels of power and involvement.

Planners will see the necessity for a regional organization to help foster communication and growth across regions. Finding consensus region-wide is important in today's global market. Regional growth management may be crucial for continued growth, both economically and with increased population. Therefore, the collaboration between regional planning bodies and local communities will be vital as the market settles into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to sustain growth and development, communities may begin realizing the value in working together.

To measure the effectiveness of H-GAC's communication and collaboration, a number of interviews will be conducted. A wide range of agencies will be interviewed, including but not limited to, planning directors, organization directors, H-GAC employees, non-profit employees and regional planning body directors. These interviews will help complete the story of Houston, H-GAC and the Sustainable Communities Grant. Professionals in the field of planning, development and politics will provide honest insight into how the consortium is structured and what is working. The key stakeholder's interviews will be used to support the research question.

Is effective communication and collaboration happening? If so, how? If not, what improvements could be made? The interviews will also help frame the answer to the “value” of the regional planning body. There is literature and studies to support the need for unbiased regional bodies in stimulating conversation and growth, but the true effect of these agencies are unclear. It is vital that a broad range of professionals are interviewed, so that not-for-profits, cities, private firms, educational institutions, and communities are represented. The following questions are a general overview of the questions that will be included in the interviews:

1. How does the presence of a regional planning body stimulate communication across the consortium members? Examples.
2. What is the role of the regional planning body? How are they doing in fulfilling their purpose for you and your agency?
3. In your opinion, what is the role of the regional planning body in communication? Is it effective? What are their real strengths? Weaknesses?
4. In your opinion, what is the role of the regional planning body in collaboration? Is it effective? What are their real strengths? Weaknesses?
5. In the consortium, which of your needs are not being met? Why?
6. What would be the implications if there was no regional planning body?

Once the interviews are completed, it will be critical to identify the key issues. . My goal is to establish that the involvement of a regional planning body was beneficial for a broad range of governmental and non-governmental agencies. This data hopefully will support the idea that there is value in a regional planning body when dealing with an extensive group of agencies and organizations. The significance of this information to planners is important. First, the research and data collected from the case study will show what positive impacts a regional planning body

can have on the local level. Second, the research will help illustrate the need for communication and collaboration throughout the planning process. Third, planners will learn strategies to set in place to achieve effective communication and collaboration by using the case study as an example.

## **CHAPTER 4 - Case Study**

### **Coordinating Committee Development**

On June 24, 2010, the U.S. -Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program Notice of Funding Availability. According to the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Fact Sheet (2010), the grant program has a \$98 million dollar budget, with large metropolitan areas; populations greater than 500,000, eligible for a maximum grant of \$5 million. The application deadline was August 23, 2010. The grant was created to:

...support regional planning efforts that integrate housing, land use, economic and workforce development, transportation, and infrastructure investments in a manner that empowers jurisdictions to consider the interdependent challenges of economic competitiveness and revitalization; social equity, inclusion, and access to opportunity; energy use and climate change; and, public health and environmental impacts. The program will place a priority on investing in partnerships, including nontraditional partnerships (e.g., arts and culture, philanthropy, etc.) and bringing new voices to the regional planning process. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2010).

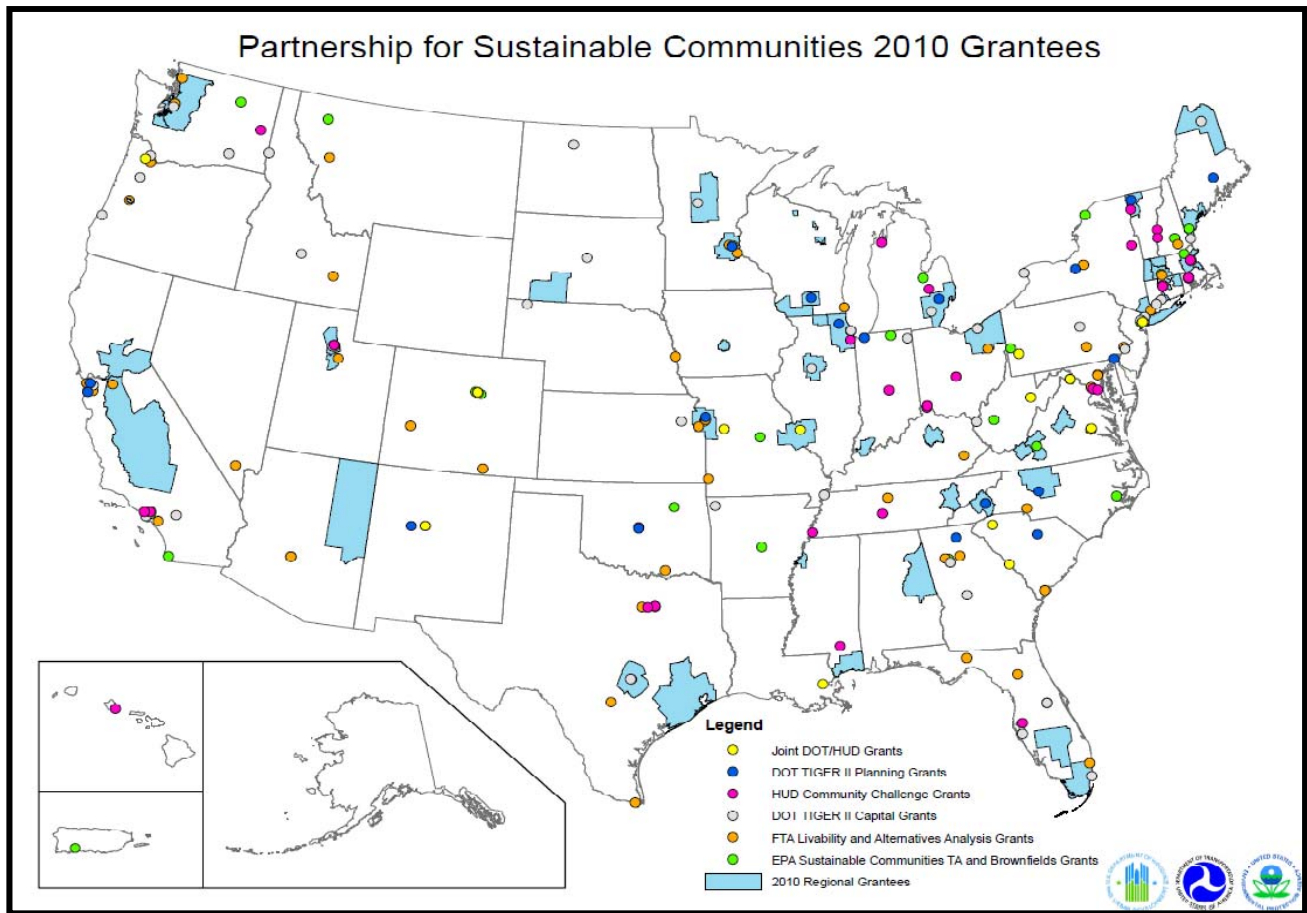
Seeing this as an opportunity to create a regional sustainability plan and guideline principles for the 13-county Gulf Coast Planning Region, the Houston-Galveston Area Council began working with the City of Houston and Harris County to establish a plan for applying for

the grant. The outcome for the grant is a long-range regional plan to address the Partnership's (HUD, EPA and DOT) six Livability Principles:

1. Provide More Transportation Choices.
2. Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing.
3. Enhance Economic Competitiveness.
4. Support Existing Communities.
5. Coordinate Policies and Leverage Investment.
6. Value Communities and Neighborhoods.

Stated in the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the collaboration of non-governmental and governmental agencies showed to be of great priority in being selected for the grant. H-GAC began an application process to find 25 members of agencies across the 13-county region with broad experience and backgrounds in community development, planning, research, equity, housing, transportation, conservation, and education. The 25-member consortium (later to be called the coordinating committee) was established and work began on the grant application during the summer of 2010. The consortium created subgroups and working committees in order to ensure the quick 60-day application deadline. The application was submitted with a request for the maximum grant amount of \$5 million. The Gulf Coast Region was selected to receive the grant with an amount of \$3.75 million. Figure 4.1 below shows the map of the grantees for the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program.

**Figure 4-1 Sustainable Communities 2010 Grantees**



Source: <http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/documents/huddoc?id=OSHCMafofGrantees.pdf>

H-GAC was officially granted the award in February 2011, with a general start date of June 1, 2011 and end date of January 31, 2014. The coordinating committee immediately began meeting after the grant was awarded, in order to complete the tasks asked of by the Office of Sustainable Communities through HUD.

The development of the coordinating committee is still in the early stages of a 3-year long grant program. This is important to keep in mind when discussing and evaluating the responses from the interviews of coordinating committee members.

## **Background of Coordinating Committee Members**

The coordinating committee for the Houston-Galveston region consists of representative from 25 agencies across the 13-county region. They are:

- Bay City Community Development Corporation
- Blueprint Houston and Center for Houston's Future
- Bolivar Peninsula Development Coalition, Inc. (PenDeCo.)
- Brazoria County
- Chambers County
- City of Galveston
- City of Houston
- City of Huntsville
- Fort Bend County
- Greater Houston Builders Association
- Gulf Coast Economic Development District
- Harris County
- Houston-Galveston Area Council
- Houston Advanced Research Center
- Houston Tomorrow
- Houston Wilderness
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation
- Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO)
- Montgomery County
- Neighborhood Centers, Inc.
- Port of Houston Authority
- Texas Southern University
- United Way of Greater Houston
- VN TeamWork, Inc.
- Waller County Economic Development

The lead applicant for the grant is the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC). H-GAC is a “voluntary association of local governments in the 13-county Gulf Coast Planning Region of Texas and the Metropolitan Planning Organization for the eight-county Houston-Galveston area” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). H-GAC participates in planning



efforts by distributing state and federal funds towards solid waste and water quality, transportation, and job training and aging services. (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010) As a voluntary association, H-GAC has experience working with local jurisdictions, state and federal agencies and public and private stakeholder groups.

The coordinating committee, besides H-GAC, includes nine policy-making governmental agencies, twelve non-profit groups, and three educational institutions and research agencies. The wide array of experience and background will hopefully set the stage for diverse collaboration and effective communication.

The nine policy-making governmental agencies are the City of Houston, Harris County, Montgomery County, City of Galveston, Brazoria County, Chambers County, City of Huntsville, Fort Bend County, and Waller County.

The City of Houston is the largest city in the region, with a 2010 resident population of 2,099,451, and is the fourth largest city in the United States and the largest city in Texas. Houston makes up 37 percent (according to the 2000 Census) of the Gulf Coast Planning Region, and is home to a diverse population. (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010)

Harris County is the third largest county in the nation, with a 2010 Census population of 4,092,459 million people. It has experience working with H-GAC, and recently was involved with H-GAC's *2035 Regional Transportation Plan*.

Montgomery County is located next to Harris County and the City of Houston, with a 2010 population of 455,746. A primary coastal evacuation route travels through Montgomery County from Houston, as well as the well traveled route from Houston to Dallas.

The City of Galveston is located in the Gulf of Mexico, and serves as a tourism hub and port for the entire region. The city is located in Galveston County, which has a population of 291,309.

Brazoria County includes a diverse mix of rural, suburban and coastal communities and has a 2010 population of 313,166. The county is located directly on the coast.

Chambers County also consists of rural and coastal populations with a 2010 population of 35,096, and is located on the southern coast of Texas.

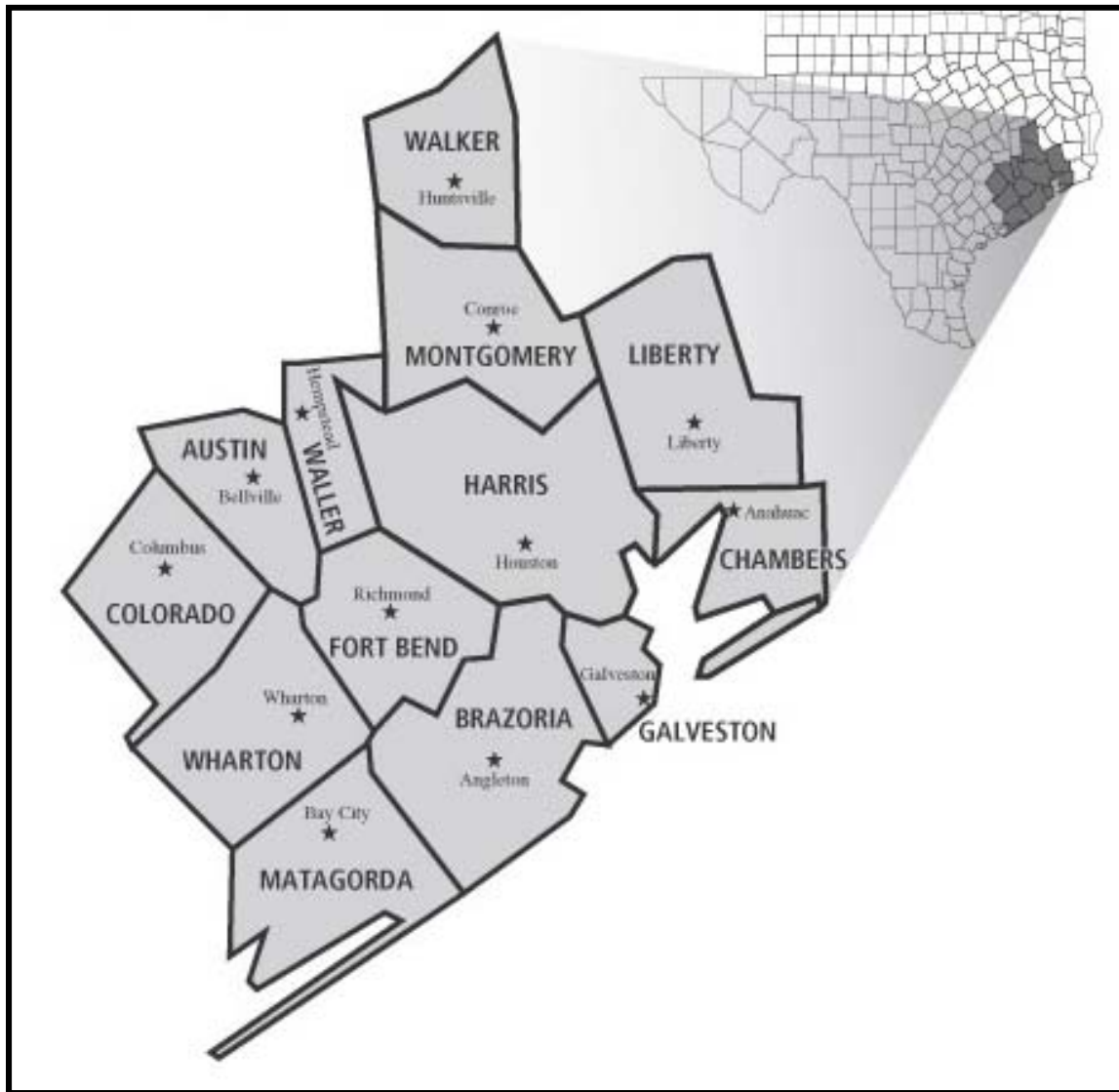
The City of Huntsville, located in Walker County (which has a 2010 population of 67,861), has a high rural and low-income population. Huntsville is ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in poverty level across all Texas cities. (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010).

Fort Bend County is located next to the City of Houston and has high population growth, with a 2010 population of 585,375.

Waller County is “a small, rural county west of Houston and Harris County that is expected to receive substantial growth in the next 20 years around existing transportation facilities” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). The 2010 population is 43,205.

The 13-county region with the county seats starred can be seen below in Figure 4.2. Six of the thirteen counties are represented at the county level, and two more counties are represented by their county seats; the City of Galveston with Galveston County and the City of Huntsville with Walker County. The counties of Colorado, Austin, Wharton and Matagorda are not represented on a policy—making governmental level.

**Figure 4-2 Gulf Coast Region**



Source: <http://recyclingstar.org/gcrc/index.html>

The twelve non-profit/ advocacy groups include the United Way of Greater Houston, Blueprint Houston and the Center for Houston's Future, the Bolivar Peninsula Development Coalition, Inc. (PenDeCo), the Bay City Community Development Corporation, the Greater Houston Builders Association, the Gulf Coast Economic Development District, Houston

Tomorrow, Houston Wilderness, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Neighborhood Centers, Inc and VN TeamWork, Inc.

The United Way of Greater Houston has been an active participant in regional planning efforts with homelessness, transportation and disaster relief. The organization works in the Harris, Fort Bend, Montgomery and Waller counties, and has substantial experience with community involvement and engagement.

Blueprint Houston and the Center for Houston's Future work together and have experience with citizens engaged in Houston's development and future growth. . The Center conducts on research with public policy and engages in workgroups and extension with business leaders, civic leaders and the general public.

The Peninsula Development Coalition, Inc. (PenDeCo) is “a non-profit organization created to enhance the quality of life of the residents of Bolivar Peninsula” (Houston-Galveston Area Council). Bolivar Peninsula is located in Galveston County, as shown in Figure 4.3. PenDeCo has experience working with disaster relief, tourism, and small business.

**Figure 4-3 Bolivar Peninsula**



Source: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/74/Galveston\\_county\\_map.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/7/74/Galveston_county_map.jpg)

The Bay City Community Development Corporation is located in Bay City, the county seat of Matagorda County. The organization is familiar with rural communities, tourism, and small business assistance.

The Greater Houston Builders Association consists of builders, remodelers, developers and companies that participate in the homebuilding industry in and around Houston. Recently, the association began the Green Built Gulf Coast, a program focusing on green building practices across the region.

The Gulf Coast Economic Development District is “the federally recognized economic development regional planning organization for the H-GAC region” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). “The GCEDD is governed by a 30-member Board of Directors with

representation from across the region, from large metropolitan cities and counties to small cities and rural counties” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010).

Houston Tomorrow is an organization focused around sustainability for the City of Houston region. The organization brings about groups of people, non-profits and civic groups to discuss future trends, needs and issues. Houston Tomorrow is familiar with stakeholder involvement and has worked on the regional level in the past.

Houston Wilderness is “a consortium of 65 local, state and federal agencies, research and education centers, conservation organizations, and business and economic interests devoted to understanding, appreciating, and preserving the ecological diversity that is found within a 100-mile radius of Houston” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). The environmental perspective will be an asset to the coordinating committee.

The Local Initiatives Support Coalition (LISC), with Houston LISC founded in 1989, is a community development organization that is nationwide. The organization brings together stakeholders and advocacy groups to bring awareness to low-income citizens and creates proactive approaches to establishing better and healthier communities.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) deals with regional transportation issues and partners with surrounding communities to stimulate economic growth and mobility solutions.

Neighborhood Centers, Inc. was first founded in 1907 and has since focused on the region’s “most vulnerable communities” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). Currently, NCI works with six community centers, twenty senior centers, twenty-four Head Start locations

and many other spaces around the Houston area to stimulate conversation and development with local, struggling communities.

VN TeamWork, Inc. is “a non-profit, community-based multiservice center that has served low-income and underserved people in the Houston area for more than 14 years” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). Originally, the organization was created to serve Vietnamese immigrants, and now works with Asian, Vietnamese and Hispanic populations.

To complete the coordinating committee, there are also three educational institutions and research agencies. They are The Houston Advanced Research Center, the Port of Houston Authority and Texas Southern University Center for Transportation and Training and Research and the Department of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy.

The Houston Advanced Research Center is “a regional leader in developing science for decision-making by policy leaders and the public” (Houston-Galveston Area Council, 2010). HARC is very unique in that it is the only organization of its kind and works on sustainability, climate impacts and environmental, economic and social equity.

The Port of Houston Authority is a large component to the regional economy, ranked first in U.S. imports. The port authority consists of 25-miles of public and private facilities.

Texas Southern University was established in 1947, and is located in Houston, Texas. The university is offering both staff support and research by graduate students in the Department of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy.

The entire 25-member coordinating committee brings a wide range of experience, knowledge and background. Each organization has a unique way of working with stakeholders, the community and other individuals. As a whole, the experience from the 25-members includes rural, urban, suburban and coastal communities, along with low-income, elderly and youth populations. The experience ranges from planning to education, the environment to the built community and public officials to scientific researchers. Each organization provided staff support to attend meetings, work in subgroups and subcommittees, and vote on agenda items or the approval of documents.

### **Coordinating Committee Collaboration**

The coordinating committee began meeting on a monthly basis in the fall of 2010. On February 21, 2011, the Sustainable Communities Planning Grant coordinating committee met for a four hour workshop and meeting, with an objective to come to a consensus of what the goals of the grant program were. H-GAC hired a consultant to conduct a facilitated exercise with the coordinating committee members, leading them through a discussion that covered the following topics:

- Inspiration [why] “*Why* are we motivated to commit to this planning effort?”
- Aspiration [what] “*What* is it we want to achieve most as a result of this planning effort?”
- Interaction to Identify Common Themes and Brown Bag Lunch
- Collaboration [how] “*How* do we need to work together to accomplish the results we want?”



The meeting was held at the offices of the Houston-Galveston Area Council in Houston, Texas. A quorum of the coordinating committee was present. The coordinating committee began the workshop with a presentation over the Living Cities Sustainable Communities Boot Camp, a three-day conference hosted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts. Five members from the coordinating committee attended the conference held January 10 - 12, 2011. Figure 4.4 shows the coordinating committee listening to the presentation given by the members who attended.

**Figure 4-4 Coordinating Committee**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

The presenters gave feedback to the coordinating committee over what they learned and discovered while meeting with thirteen other regions that have been awarded grants under the HUD's Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program.

After the presentation, a member of the H-GAC staff gave an overview of regional sustainability plans from across the country. The presentation included a study of Washington D.C., Chicago, Austin, New York City, Atlanta and Seattle. The general information was organized in a spreadsheet format and distributed to the coordinating committee members.

The coordinating committee hired a consultant to facilitate the workshop exercise. The main goals of the exercise were to begin specifying the roles and responsibilities within the coordinating committee and start agreeing on ground rules in order to move forward with the process.

The facilitator began by starting a group discussion in a seated, circular format to engage communication as illustrated in Figure 4.5 below.

**Figure 4-5 Lead discussion by facilitator**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

The group then paired up to talk about why each participant was involved in this planning grant program. Members were given two post-it notes to first record their own personal motivation and inspiration for participating, and second to record appreciation for their partner. The post-its were placed on a white wall to begin a collection of motivating ideas and inspirations for the grant and its coordinating committee members.

The next activity involved members combining into four-person groups to stimulate conversation around a shared vision for the regional plan. Figure 4.6 below shows members working in these small groups.

**Figure 4-6 Members working in small groups**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

Thoughts were recorded on post-its and again displayed on a white board, shown in Figure 4.7 below. The members grouped ideas into pods on the collage, so the coordinating committee could begin to visualize main topic ideas and points of interest.

**Figure 4-7 Members place ideas on collaborative board**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

After the small group discussion and post-it exercise, the facilitator led the coordinating committee through task commitment activity. The members of the coordinating committee toured the room writing on posters with ideas, goals, strategies and recommendations. Highlighted dots were given to each person for the purpose of showing priority when placed next to ideas or thoughts they agreed with. This activity is shown below in Figure 4.7.



**Figure 4-8 Members place dots near points of interest**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

The activity took place after lunch, with the goal to come back together and have a facilitated discussion over collaboration and how the group was going to work together to accomplish the goals discovered as a result of the workshop. Unfortunately, the coordinating committee ran out of time and the facilitator was unable to complete the entire workshop. It was evident that the structure of the workshop felt rushed, with a lot of the time lost over the lunch hour.

It was the goal of the facilitator to move the coordinating committee from being just a collective group to a collaborative group. A collective group comes together and meets on a professional level, but a collaborative group comes together to make progressive decisions and meaningful changes under a shared goal or purpose.

**Figure 4-9 Members sitting around table for presentation**



Source: Andrea Tantillo, with permission.

The coordinating committee completed the workshop with a business meeting for the last thirty minutes. Figure 4.9 above shows the coordinating committee members grouped around the large table to discuss the items on the agenda. For this meeting, the coordinating committee discussed the Public Engagement Declaration and Public Engagement Consultant Request for Proposal forms. The committee voted and approved both documents.

### **Interview Findings**

The researcher interviewed six participants in the coordinating committee, with involvement varying from governmental agencies to nonprofits and nongovernmental agencies. All the participants were asked the same six questions, surrounding the involvement of the

regional planning agency and the effectiveness of the coordinating committee's communication and collaboration to date. The interviews were conducted in February and March of 2011. Two of the six interviews were completed via email, two were conducted in person and two were completed via telephone. For the purposes of this report, all the participants will remain anonymous. This anonymity will remain throughout the interview responses, as the coordinating committee and grant program is ongoing. Some of the topics discussed in the interviews are sensitive to the development and success of the relationships between coordinating committee members, primarily since the grant is in the early stages of progress.

It was important for the research to gain a broad range of participants in the planning and related fields in order to effectively understand the role of the H-GAC. The participants represented a variety of agencies, ranging from governmental to non-governmental and non-profit to research based organizations. Each participant was asked six questions related to the role and effectiveness of the regional planning body in establishing communication and collaboration across the coordinating committee. The findings from each question and overall themes found in the conducted interviews will be discussed below.

***Question 1: How does the presence of a regional planning body stimulate communication across the coordinating committee members? Please give examples.***

All the participants noted the value in the regional planning body (H-GAC), recognizing the organization as the only agency in the region fit for the job as lead applicant. One participant said:

Without H-GAC there would be no consortium across the region. Small pockets of jurisdictions would [have] come together to apply for the grant, but I am sure

[they] would have been unsuccessful. They have provided a neutral space where government and non-profits can join together and share ideas and plans.

There have not been many opportunities in the past for governmental agencies and non-profits to come together and work on a shared goal, particularly at the regional scale.

Another participant said the following:

The regional planning body stimulates communication by its long term interaction and visibility within the region across a wide range of issues. The availability of funding for a long range planning provides a useful structure for stimulating communication across a range of individuals and organizations who might not otherwise communicate. The funding, the intent of the grant, and the structure provided by the process stimulate (or potentially stimulate) more and different communication than would take place otherwise. Examples include all coordinating committee meeting to date, small groups working on specific aspects of the proposal and early tasks, and communication needed initially to engage participants.

The two quotes above mirrored the remaining participant's thoughts that no other agency in the region has the neutral background or experience to apply as lead applicant. Aside from all agreeing that H-GAC is the most appropriate candidate for the lead applicant position, the rest of the conversation saw varying responses of how each participant feels the regional planning body is doing to successfully (or unsuccessfully) stimulate communication across the coordinating committee. When dealing with a broad array of policymaking agencies, non-profits, research



organizations and educational institutions, they proved to be a broad array of opinions on how H-GAC should facilitate coordinating committee meetings and communication.

One participant stated that H-GAC has taken on an administrative approach to conducting coordinating committee meetings and voting. They continued to explain that this administrative process takes care of the decision end of tasks, but leaves out effectively leading the group in discussion. They stated that “talking and discussion isn’t easy; it’s a painful process. People don’t feel like they’re part of the discussion, but you can’t assume everyone wants to be a part of the discussion either.” The participant broke up the members of the coordinating committee into two types of people; task-oriented or big picture. The participant views H-GAC as a task-oriented agency, and the differences between “task-oriented” and “big picture” people are heightened when given deadlines and tasks for projects incorporated with the development of the regional plan.

Another participant talked about H-GAC’s role from a different perspective, saying that “they (H-GAC) also offer limited referee services; however, I wish they would do more on their own. Be a leader among leaders.” It is evident from this quote that participants are varied in their opinions about what the role of H-GAC should be. This is important because it is true that finding consensus regarding effective collaboration and communication across these multiple agencies will be difficult. The broad, regional combination of backgrounds and experience is an asset, but establishing an agreement on what the role of H-GAC should be according to the coordinating committee will not be easy.

According to the interview responses, participants are aware of the challenges H-GAC faces, but are weary of how information is being shared and distributed. Another participant

echoed this concern of communication, saying that their main challenge is that “they (H-GAC) are trying to stimulate communication through e-mail or meetings ... this seems cumbersome. The meetings are long, or you only have one day to respond. I’m used to shorter meetings and knowing about things farther in advance.” Currently, a large amount of the communication between the coordinating committee members is through e-mail. More than one participant agreed that the way communication is being handled has room for improvement.

It is easy to notice the discrepancies between participant’s responses to the questions. One participant talked about the suspicion between coordinating committee members on what one group does and another doesn’t, when talking about tasks to be accomplished or conversations and decisions made between coordinating committee meetings.

It was clear, however, that all the participants were aware of the challenges H-GAC will face as the grant and coordinating committee carries out the grant for the next three years. “There’s just a general feeling that everyone operates differently, [coordinating committee needs to] come together to operate the same way... need to be seen as one body communicating.” The quote above is a reflection of the overall opinions facing H-GAC’s stimulation of communication thus far.

***Question 2: What is the role of the regional planning body? How are they doing in fulfilling their purpose for you and your agency?***

The answers collected for this question included both technical and opinionated responses. All participants noted that the grant and coordinating committee is still early in the process, recognizing that the role and fulfillment may change over time.

One participant explained the role of H-GAC within the region, saying “The initial roles of the regional planning body includes primary responsibility for writing the proposal, organizing participants, conducting all meetings, managing staff, and legal/financial responsibilities for proposal submittal and contract negotiations.” Another explained more specific roles:

[H-GAC] assists the region to identify and address issues in areas such as regional and municipal planning, economic and community development, GIS, hazard mitigation and disaster recovery, transit planning and pollution control. They do this by creating plans, reports and data sets as well as forming planning a discussion groups and committees, holding trainings and workshops, and collaborating on grants. I think H-GAC does an above average job.

The roles explained above shows the level of involvement H-GAC has in the region, responsible for projects and collaboration that include a broad range of communities. The experience H-GAC has regarding these projects in the past made multiple participants agree that H-GAC would be a “good facilitator for the process”. All agreed that H-GAC has demonstrated ability to complete projects and work in a regional context, important for the Sustainable Communities Grant.

The responses to the second part of the question differed. One participant felt as though “The regional planning body is doing an excellent job in relation to our organization in overall organization of the project and moving the project forward.” Others felt differently, saying:

[H-GAC is] still struggling on defined role. The workshop missed the mark on completing that, we need to go back and possibly do the workshop again, or have

social events to get together and discuss. [A] lot of people around table have trouble speaking up. We need to do that; tear down the barriers and be frank, come to a common purpose and strategy.

The frustration over the effectiveness of the workshop was shared by multiple participants, with general thoughts that the workshop was premature. Two participants voiced that the aspiration section of the workshop, centered around the question “What is it that we want to achieve most as a result of this planning effort?” caused the most confusion. The participants said that it was hard to have a discussion when not all of the coordinating committee members were on the same page about the end goal of the project.

Five of the six participants referenced the idea that the coordinating committee and H-GAC still lack shared direction and purpose. The main concern among participants was how H-GAC was fulfilling their purpose as lead applicants. Participants did mention that they were impressed with H-GAC’s desire to improve. With such a variety of responses, it is clear that H-GAC will continue to struggle with providing the most effective amount of support and involvement in the coordinating committee.

***Question 3: In your opinion, what is the role of the regional planning body in communication? Is it effective? What are their real strengths? Weaknesses?***

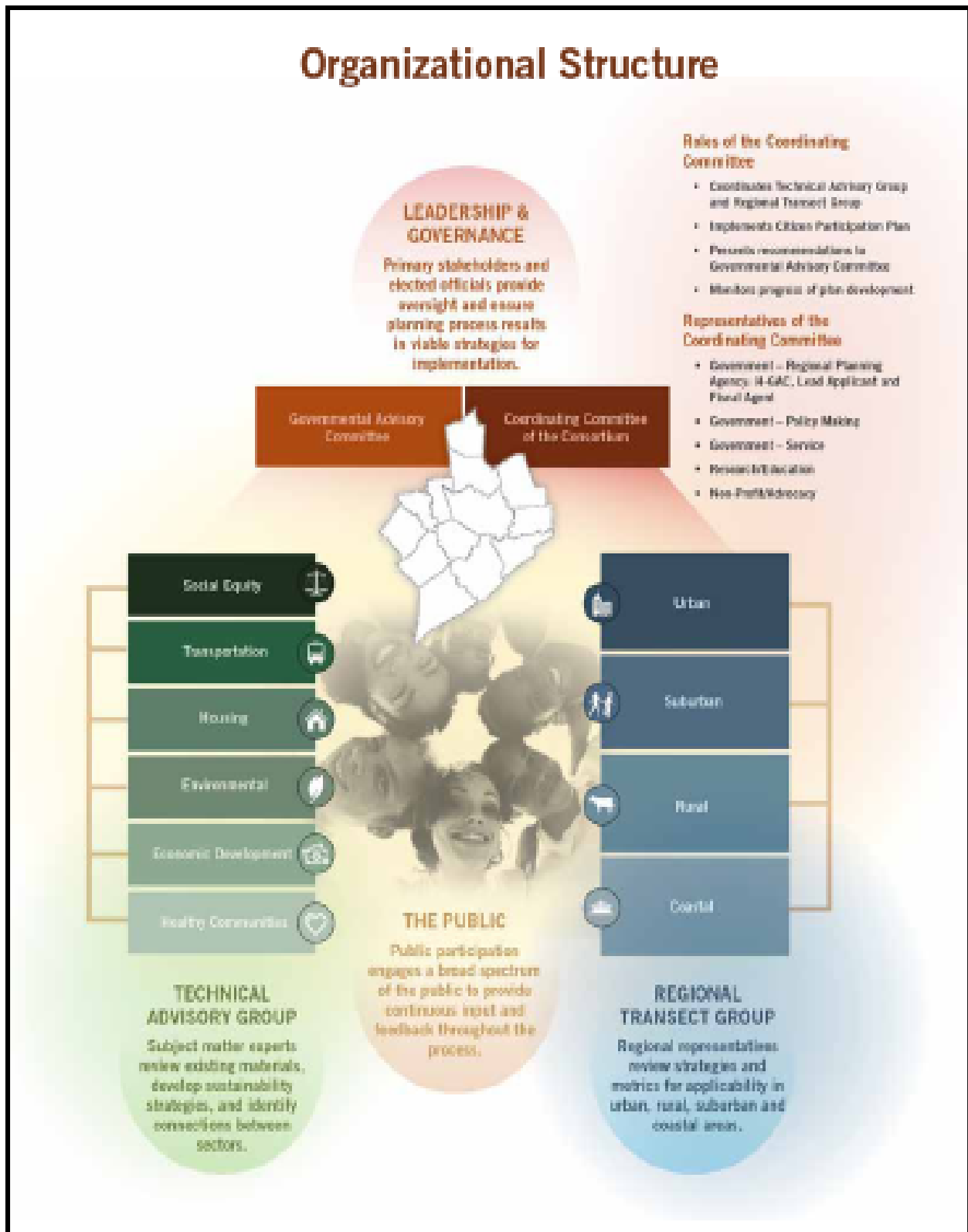
Similar to the other responses participants gave, the effectiveness of H-GAC in regards to communication was across the board. The responses echoed the ones given above for question one. A second participant mentioned the struggle in having to work with short time frames to give comments and review on materials. The participant raised the challenge to complete this hurdle smoothly by putting it on the other coordinating committee members, saying:

To date, H-GAC plays the primary role in accomplishing [communication], but participant members need to take responsibility instead. Without non-staff leadership, the potential for widespread adoption of the plan output is less likely.

To date, such leadership is not evident.

The federal government implemented the need for a coordinating committee for a reason, being that responsibilities from the grant could be shared across the consortium. This breakdown of roles is why the coordinating committee established the organizational structure shown below (Figure 4.10). In this, the subcommittee and transect level groups will eventually work together and communicate to accomplish goals and deadlines. A majority of the participants agreed that the struggle with establishing efficient communication among the coordinating committee was not all H-GAC's responsibility. This area for improvement is shared among all the coordinating committee members.

Figure 4-10 Regional Planning Grant Organizational Structure



Source: Houston-Galveston Area Council Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Application, 2010.

As illustrated above in Figure 4.10, the coordinating committee oversees the development and collaboration of the entire process. The technical advisory groups, public and regional transect groups all report back to the coordinating committee and governmental advisory committee. This organizational structure will come to fruition as the three-year project continues. Since it is still early in the process, the coordinating committee has been the only group meeting in order to establish the long-term goals and commitments for the grant. To date, the coordinating committee has been accomplishing tasks by working in subcommittees and workgroups made up of coordinating committee members interested in participating. The different levels of involvement (subcommittees and workgroups) seemed to be popular among the participants interviewed as said in this comment:

The coordinating committee breakdown of structure into technical subcommittees and transects will be pretty well prepared for that good kind of communication. A number of different people and agencies will pull into the process, which will be diverse and open and inclusive.

It was stated in more than one response that H-GAC has a responsibility to act as a moderator or neutral party for all the organizations involved. This has proven to be difficult, as illustrated in the wide variety of responses on how H-GAC is doing thus far in the process. Participants recognized room to improve and showed confidence in the ability of H-GAC to eventually reach an effective way to communicate with the 25-member coordinating committee. Time was a pressing matter among the participants, who recognized the important of reaching this “effective communication” before the project gets too far along.

Another aspect of communication for H-GAC noted from the interviews is the relationship with the federal government who is overseeing the grant process. On this, one participant said that “H-GAC is uncomfortable with letting a lot go because of [their] obligations with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).”

This responsibility is put upon H-GAC in order to lessen the amount of people contacting the federal government for questions, concerns, comments and information. The participants are all informed of this structure, as it is laid out in the action plan in the grant application, but some were weary of H-GAC being uncomfortable with letting some of the control fall upon other coordinating committee members. This idea comes back to the notion a participant touched on saying that the coordinating committee should be working together as one organization, especially when it deals with effective communication.

***Question 4: In your opinion, what is the role of the regional planning body in collaboration? Is it effective? What are their real strengths? Weaknesses?***

As seen in the responses above, the participant’s answers to these questions again reference H-GAC and its appropriate role as lead applicant for the grant. A participant said that “H-GAC is the neutral jurisdiction, [they’re] not for any one jurisdiction’s agenda, [but] supportive of a regional agenda. [H-GAC] have good contacts locally and at state and federal.” The idea of this “regional agenda” is important to note. The reason H-GAC is seen as the appropriate lead applicant across all the participants is because of its neutrality and experience. This experience is an asset to the region and can be used to stimulate collaboration across all the agencies participating. Although it is the lead applicant, it is important to note that participants want the other coordinating committee members to be seen as equal players. “The role of the



regional planning body in collaboration needs to be one of sharing power with participants in ways that achieve collaboration. If participants perceive the project as H-GAC's project, meaningful collaboration will not occur." This view of H-GAC sharing power with the participants is collective among the majority of the participants interviewed. Each participant is a representative of their agency and has a responsibility to represent their agency, just as H-GAC represents the region.

One participant said that H-GAC does not show enough force when one factions tries to take over. They said that, "This leaves us with a referee and nothing gets done." Clearly, this participant would appreciate H-GAC taking a stronger hold of coordinating committee meetings and participation. This view was not shared across the participants, but is important to note in the structure of the coordinating committee and the roles of each participant. Collaboration is necessary to accomplish the regional plan, but how the collaboration should be exercised and structured within the coordinating committee is not shared across the board.

Another participant described H-GAC as a "convener of groups"; one that has the unique position to bring groups together. These thoughts were also mentioned by other participants. However helpful H-GAC's role in bringing groups together, thoughts were shared on where H-GAC could improve. The idea of control within the H-GAC staff was again mentioned, with one participant saying "The weakness [of H-GAC] is the difficulty in turning control over to those outside of the regional planning body's immediate staff; fear of not being able to control outputs and the difficulty of meeting contractual commitments." The contractual commitments mentioned are the obligations H-GAC, as lead applicant, has to the federal government involved with the grant program.

A second participant agreed with the above statement, recognizing the amount of constraints H-GAC is responsible for when having to submit updates and documents to HUD on a strict, and sometimes short, time schedule.

Another weakness brought to fruition was that of ensuring that H-GAC keeps the climate of the coordinating committee positive and does not allow the project to stagnate. It was mentioned that the task of keeping the project going and the 25-member coordinating committee together will be difficult over three years. Ideally, everyone would “work at the same level (with the idea of collaboration)”.

***Question 5: In the coordinating committee, which of your needs are not being met?  
Why?***

The responses from the participants for the question were broad and ranged from meeting expectations to not meeting expectations. Overall, it was understood that the project is still in the early stages and improvements can be made. With that, one participant said the following and set the tone for the rest of the participant’s responses:

H-GAC is the grant administrator, I am waiting for them to administer. With our input, H-GAC wrote the grant, but they seem reluctant to lead its implementation.

The consortium is like a row boat with 25 oar-men all doing their own thing and we are getting nowhere. We need a leader to organize, set the beat, and guide us.

The idea that the leadership for the coordinating committee is fragmented was a concern for the majority of the participants, as seen in the comments surrounding Question 4. A fragmented coordinating committee will not produce the best outcomes, further supporting the idea that

effective collaboration is crucial for the success of the grant. Participants voiced the need for more structure and organization within the coordinating committee.

Other participants were satisfied with H-GAC. The participant who stated that their agency's needs are being met said the following:

Our needs have been met to date. This is very early in a longer term process. Our needs are primarily to participate in this important project without being overwhelmed by requirements of participation (time and resources). Until the process is more fully organized, our specific needs are unknown.

This participant admits to not wanting the added responsibility of being the lead applicant. As previously mentioned, H-GAC is responsible for organizing the coordinating committee and keeping in contact with HUD. They admit that as the project moves forward the organization of the coordinating committee may shift, thus changing the current responsibilities of each member.

Other participants noted different needs. One participant voiced the confusion in working with a large group focused around planning terms and jargon, saying that:

We are not a planning organization, so participating has been challenging with planning jargon. Making topics accessible, making meetings accessible; it seems like people are almost discouraged from participating. Non-governmental [agencies] have more capacity to participate in things like this, so if discouraged then people will drop out.

Other participants voiced concern in the effectiveness of meetings and the lack of good facilitation and participation. With the time constraints of all the coordinating committee members, participants voiced concern over making the meetings truly meaningful and effective. The concept of resources was also mentioned more than once when referring to how the various agencies needs were being met. That idea fit with the same concerns that H-GAC seems unwilling to turn over some of the control to other coordinating committee members.

***Question 6: What would be the implications if there was no regional planning body?***

The majority of the responses were similar to this question. The participants recognized that without a neutral player acting as lead administrator, the grant project would be altered. One participant said the following:

It would be unlikely that the region could undertake a project of this magnitude without the regional planning body. It requires a relatively large organization with regional responsibilities. It requires an organization with the legal and financial capabilities to manage a project of this size. It requires an organization that is already well know to potential participants.

The thoughts mentioned above were similar to the other participants. The legal and financial capabilities of H-GAC provide structure and organization to the Gulf Coast Region, especially when concerning a regional plan. Participants and agencies across the region will have the opportunity to play an active role in a regional planning grant administered by the regional planning agency.

This regional group effort is unique and provides collaboration that is beneficial to the region. Collaboration is the main component of this report, and was highly valued

among the participants. One participant felt that “[My agency] would compete against the jurisdictions more often with no collaboration. Thus we would be less successful in our tasks.” The collaboration created because of the grant is as asset to the region as a whole, providing an incentive for governmental and non-governmental agencies to come together and communicate.

One participant voiced what they thought would happen if there wasn’t a regional planning body to be the lead administrator for the grant, saying:

Someone like the city or the county [could] step up and convene this group and make things happen. [The] implications would be that other people from outlying areas would not come to the table. Groups inside the city would be likely to move forward. H-GAC can bring governmental, nonprofit and business together. [H-GAC is] the only agency to bring all the entities across the region.

Even though the participant noted that the city or county could step up and take the administrator role, they admitted that the variety of people involved would not be the same. Just as the regional grant is unique in establishing a sustainable plan, the regional planning agency is unique in providing opportunities for collaboration. “The way the feds are talking about restructuring how to receive funding in the future, [the region] needs this regional plan and guiding principles. [If not completed] could be discounted compared to other regions, because we weren’t able to get there.”

The Gulf Coast Region has the tools and agencies involved in the coordinating committee to effectively create the regional plan. Even though it is early in the process of

a three-year commitment, all the participants noted the value in the regional planning body. Without the neutral regional agency, governmental and non-governmental agencies would be doubtful of the plan. It would be viewed as a biased project for a specific community or county, instead of a collaborative regional effort.

## **CHAPTER 5 - Conclusion**

The overall themes from the case study and interviews are important and relevant to the planning profession in better understanding regionalism and the effects of collaborative efforts across various agencies. Collectively, the interviews came to four general conclusions when discussing the role of H-GAC in the Sustainable Communities grant process and where there is room for improvement.

1. H-GAC is not utilizing the resources available to them from the coordinating committee.
2. H-GAC needs to play the role of a referee in ensuring that all coordinating committee members are heard and represented.
3. H-GAC is currently struggling with letting go of tasks and giving up control.
4. There is an apparent lack of leadership in the coordinating committee.

Overall, these conclusions of H-GAC's performance as lead applicant are not permanent organizational flaws. All participants were optimistic that H-GAC will improve as the grant program continues.

The resources available to H-GAC through the members of the coordinating committee are a strong asset to the development and success of the regional plan. The reason for the coordinating committee is to provide a variety of experiences, backgrounds, technical assistance, educational opportunities and perspectives for the future of the Gulf Coast Region. To date, the participants felt that the resources available to H-GAC by the coordinating committee members were being underutilized. It is important that the regional planning body be aware of the resources available, as they are unique assets.

The participants throughout the interviews voiced a common interest in wanting the regional planning body to step up as a referee during coordinating committee meetings and workshops. The referee role is important in ensuring that each member feels supported, as the group is so diverse in both size and backgrounds. At the same time, multiple participants also stated that H-GAC is having a difficult time letting go of tasks and responsibilities. In the opinion of the participants interviewed, H-GAC could benefit by outsourcing some of the responsibilities onto members of the coordinating committee willing to help. These relationships would further advance communication and collaboration, as it would illustrate that multiple agencies were stepping up and taking an active role in the development of the plan.

Finally, the lack of leadership in the coordinating committee was discussed in the interviews, with the criticism weighing on all 25 members. The participants agreed that leadership doesn't have to come from only H-GAC. With the broad range of experience and expertise, there are multiple ways for agencies and members to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. This area for improvement is interchangeable with the other criticisms. H-GAC has the ability to improve the communication among the coordinating committee, and the participants are willing to help and support the regional planning body throughout this process.

These areas for improvement are not the only overall themes taken from the interviews. The participants also agreed on several ways that H-GAC effectively represents the region establishing communication and collaboration across the coordinating committee.

1. The coordinating committee would not be the same without the unbiased role of H-GAC.
2. H-GAC has an overarching support for the entire region, not just one agency, business, community or demographic.



3. Without H-GAC, the 25-member coordinating committee would not have been established; the neutrality of H-GAC is its biggest asset.

These conclusions are important to note when answering the research question: What is the value of a regional planning body in ensuring effective communication and collaboration across region-wide governmental and non-governmental agencies? Even with the recommendations for improvement, all the participants agreed that H-GAC was the only agency in the region that held the neutral ground and background in order to play a “referee” or mediator role in the coordinating committee. It was mentioned numerous times that without the presence of the regional planning body, getting the 25 various agencies together would be nearly impossible, as they have never had a reason to communicate to this level in the past.

For this report, it is important to look at how regions and communities can reach this type of holistic collaboration without incentives such as a regional grant. What types of agencies have the ability to outreach to educational institutions, research facilities, governmental agencies and nonprofits? In communities, collective decision-making is an asset in order to stay open and in agreement with surrounding communities concerning a variety of topics such as transportation, affordable housing, mobility, energy use, land conservation and rural development.

The purpose of the regional grant was to break down barriers among agencies that may have otherwise never communicated, although part of the same region. This inaugural approach to regional planning will be important to watch as the program continues into the next three years, as the silos should not be put back up when the plan is over. Most importantly, the social capital captured through the sustainable communities grant program is immeasurable and critical to sustain for the Gulf Coast Region.

The Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant is a money-based opportunity for governmental and non-governmental agencies to work together. This example of collaboration through a regional grant doesn't need to be the only way to get multiple agencies communicating and collaborating. The researcher sees the value in these regional planning bodies as a mediator for discussion and development concerning a range of topics such as housing, transportation, economic development, and the environment. Are there ways to stimulate regional collaboration without money? Finding other ways to encourage the collaboration created by the regional planning grant without the incentive of money is of interest to the researcher for future research.

The planning profession can gain a better understanding of the value in these regional planning bodies that clearly hold unique leverage in establishing communication across local and county levels, and gets regions discussing issues that affect all involved. Regional planning bodies give a variety of agencies a reason to come together and discuss regional challenges. With this collaboration come proactive solutions on how to move forward and plan for the future of the region.

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